



Parenting in the Context of Domestic Violence

Judicial Council of California, Administrative Office of the Courts

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Executive Summary

The courts have been presented with increasing numbers of families for whom difficult decisions must be made following single or multiple violent events involving both adult and child victims. The social science literature reviewed in the report entitled “Parenting in the Context of Domestic Violence”¹ describes children’s exposure to domestic violence, the needs of both parents and children in the context of domestic violence events, and the resources available to help them. The following points summarized by staff at the Center for Families, Children & the Courts (CFCC)², highlight the major findings of the full report.

Parenting by Perpetrators of Domestic Violence

- Observations and clinical experience suggest that perpetrators of domestic violence are often more controlling and authoritarian, less consistent, and more likely to manipulate the children and undermine the mothers’ parenting than nonviolent fathers³.
- Child exposure to domestic violence has an estimated 40 percent rate of co-occurrence with child maltreatment, according to a meta-analysis of 30 studies.
- In one study, one-third of battered women experienced domestic violence after separating from their spouses. Key variables that predicted repeat assaults included threats from the perpetrator, the perpetrator’s proximity to his victim, and his prior accusations of her sexual infidelity.

Parenting by Victims of Domestic Violence

- Battered mothers appear to experience significantly greater levels of stress than non-battered mothers do. However, this stress does not always translate into diminished parenting.
- Battered mothers may be more likely than others to use some type of aggression against their children but are less likely to do so when they are safe.
- The research on battered mothers reveals that in the face of severe stress they may compensate for violent events by offering increased nurturing and protection to their children. Adult victims often make decisions to stay with or leave their perpetrator based on their sense of the best interest of their children.

¹ Edleson, Jeffrey L., Mbilinyi, Lyungai F., Shetty, Sudha. (2003). *Parenting in the Context of Domestic Violence*. San Francisco: Judicial Council of California, Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children & the Courts. Available at <http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc/resources/publications>.

² The Center for Families, Children & the Courts generates and distributes research-based information that has promise for informing the work of family court services in California and nationwide. To learn more about the work of our office and to see more research updates, visit our Web site: <http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc>. Or contact Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children & the Courts, 455 Golden Gate Avenue, 6th Floor, San Francisco, CA 94102-3688.

The views expressed in this research update are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the Judicial Council of California or the Administrative Office of the Courts.

³ Bancroft, L., and Silverman, J. (2002). *The batterer as parent*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Assessing the Impact of Domestic Violence on Children and Parenting

- While close to half of the children of domestic violence victims are estimated to be physically abused, there is also growing concern for those children who are exposed to domestic violence but are not themselves the victims of physical or sexual abuse.
- In general, boys exposed to domestic violence have been shown to exhibit more frequent problems and problems that are externally oriented, such as hostility and aggression, while girls generally show evidence of more internally oriented problems, such as depression and somatic complaints.
- Children of different ages appear to exhibit different responses to witnessing violence, with children in preschool reported to exhibit more problems than other age groups.
- Children appear to exhibit fewer problems the longer the period of time since their exposure to a violent event.

Intervention with Families after Incidents of Domestic Violence

- Interventions with children exposed to domestic violence are most often provided in the form of individual treatment for trauma, group support, and education. Initial evaluations of these programs reveal that the children who participated were able to reduce their use of aggressive behaviors, lessen anxious and depressive behaviors, and improve both their mental health and social relationship with peers.
- There has been an increased effort to intervene with parents after domestic violence has occurred, through programs such as parent support groups that run concurrently with children's programs, in-home services, and working with mother-child dyads. Initial data on these programs show positive outcomes for children and parents.
- Most batterer programs historically have not included significant content on parenting, but several examples of emerging programs that do so are described in the full report. Unfortunately, there is no published evaluation of these programs that would help to understand their effectiveness or refine existing efforts.
- Supervised visitation programs are being used more often for families experiencing domestic violence. Supervised visitation is recommended only when appropriate staff training and extensive safety measures are taken. Currently, no data exist on the impact of supervised visitation programs on families experiencing domestic violence.

The existing literature on parenting in the context of domestic violence has many limitations, both in terms of the limited samples and the generalizability of the findings. These issues are covered more thoroughly in the "Directions for Future Inquiry" section of the full report. Additionally, very few standardized instruments are available to help assess the impact of violence on children. However, practice recommendations can be found in the "Pointers for Practice" section of the full report.

The past decade has witnessed a steadily growing interest in the impact of domestic violence on children. Very recently, attention has also focused on how the parenting of both perpetrators and victims may be better assessed and improved through education and support efforts. A tremendous opportunity exists to carefully expand on and refine this work in the future.